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### The First Day of (Desegregated) School in Nashville, September 9,1957

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## The First Day of (Desegregated) School in Nashville, September 9, 1957

Following the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, which declared school segregation unconstitutional, some African American families in Nashville began seeking to enroll their children as students in what were then all-white schools. Families of over twenty children filed suit against the school system in September 1955 after being denied admission to the school closest to their home.

Court hearings and public meetings were held throughout 1956, and the school board worked to develop a plan acceptable to the Federal district court. This plan, which became known as the "Nashville Plan" called for desegregating schools one year at a time, beginning with the first grade for the 1957-58 school year. Opposition grew through the summer of 1957, in anticipation of African-American students enrolling at previously white schools. Infamous white supremacist John Kasper visited Nashville and inflamed segregationists throughout August, holding meetings and rallies in parks and on school grounds.

On August 25, 1957, thirteen African-American parents registered their first-grade children to attend their (white) neighborhood school. Although there were protestors at the schools, there were no incidents of violence. However, many of these families received threatening letters and phone calls over the next few days, as did teachers and principals at these schools.

September 9, 1957, was the first day of desegregated school in Nashville.

**Clemons School:** Four black first-grade students enrolled at Clemons School, on 12th Avenue South, on September 9. None of them had registered early, and so the organized protestors had not paid much

attention to Clemons. One of the first-graders was six-year-old Joy Smith, the daughter of Kelly Miller Smith; Joy stayed at Clemons through the sixth grade.

**Bailey:** Bailey School, on East Greenwood Avenue, had one African American student pre-register to attend. A crowd of a several dozen white protestors gathered at the school, but no black families brought their children. The child who had been pre-registered was in the care of her grandparents, who, like many of the other families, had received threatening phone calls. They transferred their granddaughter, and no African-American students attended Bailey in 1957-58.

**Caldwell:** Records indicated that at least thirteen African-American students were in the Meridian Street neighborhood of Caldwell School, although none pre-registered. Still, over a hundred protestors gathered at Caldwell that morning, and when three families came to school on the first day, the crowd grew violent: cursing, spitting on the children, and throwing rocks. While the principal kept the families in his office, several people entered the school, searching classrooms for the black children before being detained by police. It was determined that transfer records for these three children were incomplete, and they were not enrolled at Caldwell. No African-American children attended Caldwell in 1957-58.

**Glenn:** Located on Cleveland Street in East Nashville, Glenn Elementary was the focus of the white supremacists' efforts on September 9. Approximately two dozen African-American children were eligible to enter first grade at Glenn based on their address, and segregationists spent the greatest amount of time at Glenn. John Kasper made an appearance to fuel the gathering crowd's

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ire. Only three African-American children came to school that first day, entering the building with their parents through a jeering mob with a few policemen for protection. While the two young girls who were pre-registered were shown to classrooms, several white parents began withdrawing their students. Approximately half of Glenn's enrollment of five hundred was marked absent on the first day of school, but within a week, the normal attendance pattern resumed.

**Fehr:** Fehr School in the Salemtown area had the second-largest number of potential African-American students who could attend, although only four came on the first day of school. They were faced with a crowd of over two hundred protestors who cursed the children as they entered, and two white women were arrested for disorderly conduct. When school let out at noon, real trouble began. As the crowd began throwing rocks and bottles, Linda McKinley's mother pulled a nail file from her pocket in protection, and was arrested. As the custodian of the school lowered the American flag, protestors assaulted him and slashed the tires of his car. Of the first African-American students at Fehr, only Linda McKinley returned to Fehr for second grade.

**Buena Vista:** Three African American children had preregistered to attend first grade at Buena Vista School on 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue North. A large crowd of protestors gathered, but they remained somewhat restrained. Although they had signs and shouted slogans, there was no violence, although an ominous parade of vehicles painted with KKK signage and waving Confederate flags circled the building. Two of the three students who enrolled that first day, Erroll Groves and Ethel Mai Carr, remained at Buena Vista all year, and would attend through sixth grade.

**Jones:** North of Buena Vista, also on 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue North, four African American students entered the building through a noisy crowd of protestors, although no violence broke out. Like the other families, these families had been subjected to a barrage of threats against their home, their families, and their children. All four children who entered Jones that first day completed the first grade there, and three returned for second grade the following year.

**Cotton:** No African-American children had pre-registered at Hattie Cotton, and no protestors lined the schoolyard as a lone young black girl entered the school with her mother. Word spread quickly, however, and several protestors were outside the school at dismissal. The parade of segregationists' cars circled the school throughout the morning. As the children began leaving, the principal, Margaret Cate, noticed that no one had arrived to pick up the child. Her mother, frightened by the protestors, had called a taxi for her, which had come but not waited. Cate took the child home in her own car, and later than night received a threatening phone call.

Although no violence had erupted at Hattie Cotton during the school day, shortly after midnight, the largest act of violence would occur there, when a large case of dynamite exploded at the front of the school. This act of violence shocked most citizens of Nashville, and civic leaders from Mayor Ben West to Police Chief Hosse, to Criminal Court Judge Charles Gilbert led the city in denouncing the violence and the protestors; John Kasper was arrested. Eleven of the sixteen children returned to their now desegregated schools on the second day, now under a heavy police presence. Within a week, enrollment figures had resumed in Nashville schools.

**Tara Mitchell Mielnik, Ph.D.**

**Metropolitan Nashville Historical Commission**

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